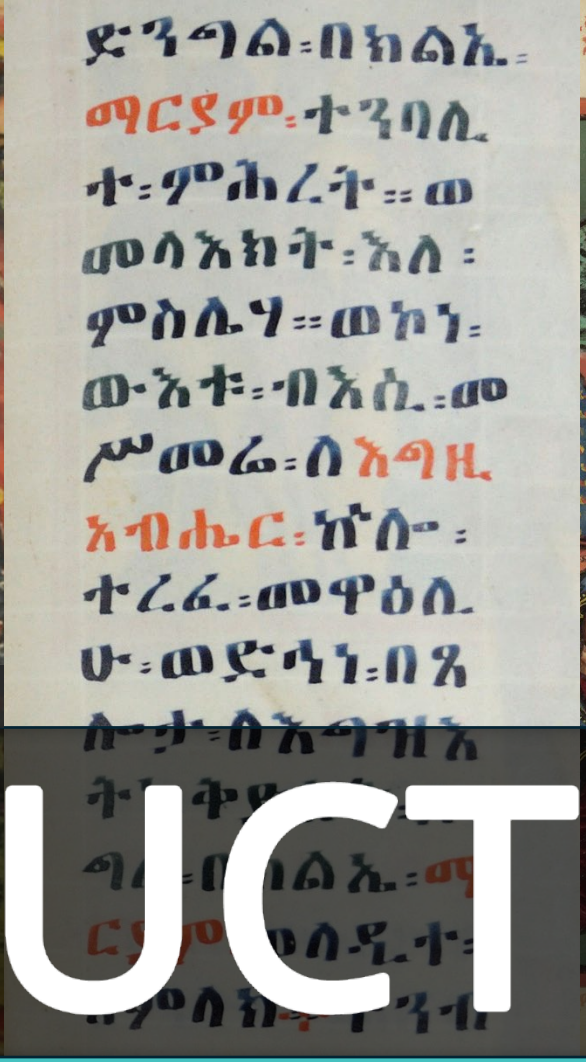
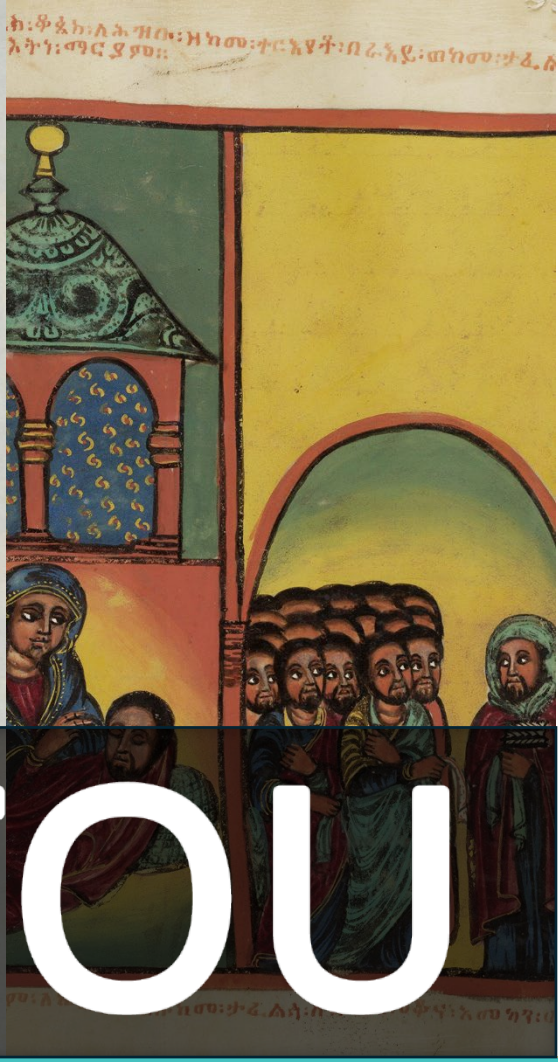


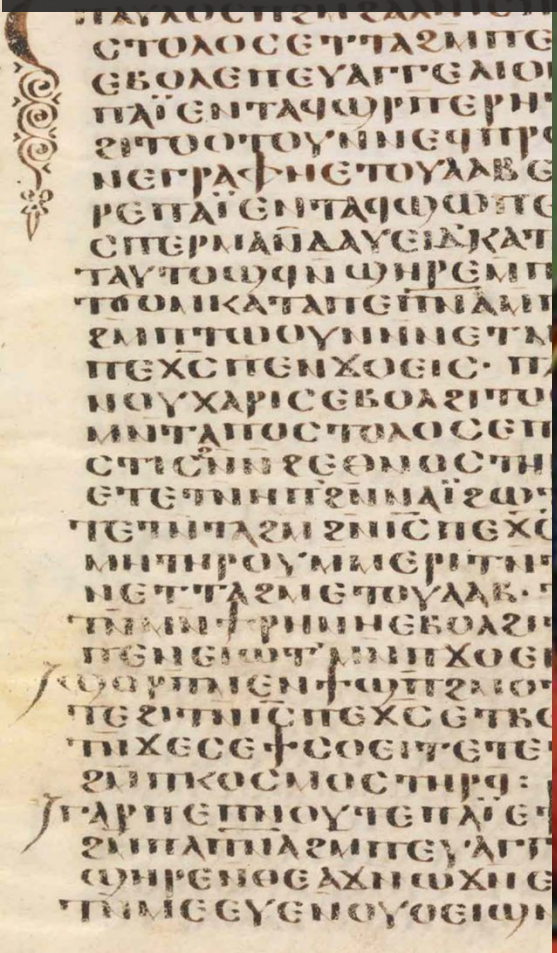


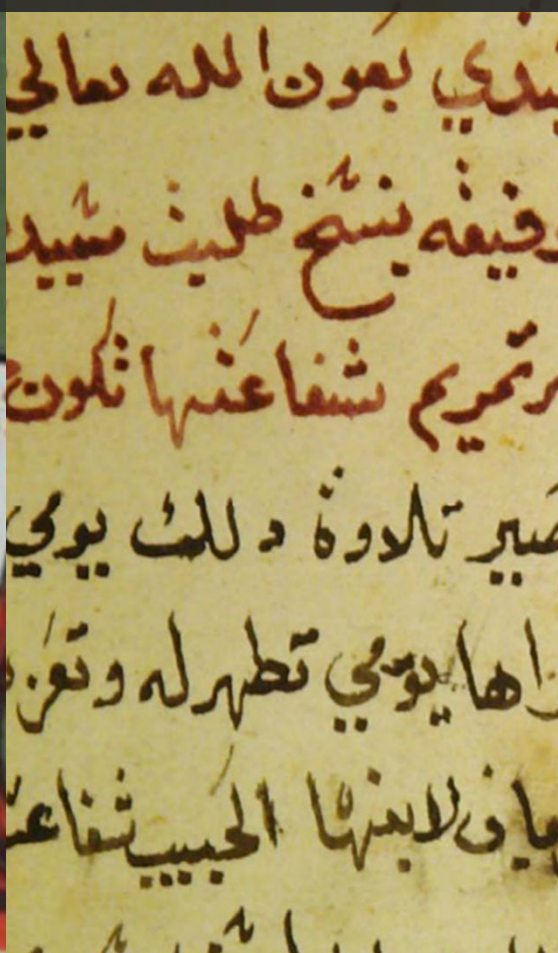
Issue 3, Fall 2025

BOUCTOU

AN AFRICANA MAGAZINE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Africa's Long History of Writing: Ethiopia, Eritrea and Egypt





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Introduction

By Wendy Laura Belcher

We are thrilled to give you this special issue on the history of writing in Africa! Lots of people assume that Africa didn't have any writing until recently. But, that's not true. Africans have been writing books and creating scripts over thousands of years. In this issue, you will learn all about that, with a focus on three countries in northeast Africa: Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Egypt.

In "The Long History of Writing in Africa," you will learn about seven African writing systems, from hieroglyphics to alphabets. Four of the scripts discussed in the article were created over two thousand years ago. Others were invented recently.

In "The Ancient African Language and Script of Geʿez," you will learn more about one specific language and script used in East Africa. Many of the books discussed in this special issue were originally written down in the Geʿez script and the Geʿez language. This language is quite different from English. For instance, in English "She handed it to him" is a full sentence. In the Geʿez language, that would be one word! This script is still in use today, to write modern languages in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

In "Ancient and Medieval Literature in the Geʿez Language and Script," you will learn about the thousands of books written in this language and script. Long ago, most books in this language were translations from Greek. The books that Africans wrote in this language then were not preserved. But, starting in the 1300s, highland Ethiopians began writing lots of compositions in Geʿez, including biographies of famous Ethiopians, beautiful poetry, short stories about desperate people, historical accounts about kings, and books of Christian theology and philosophy.

In "Ancient and Medieval Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts," you will learn about African manuscripts written in two languages other than Geʿez. Both were used in Egypt by Christians. The Coptic language and script was used during the ancient period, the Arabic language and script was used during the medieval and modern period.

In "Healing and Justice: The Virgin Mary in African Literature and Art," you will learn about a set of ancient, medieval, and modern folktales written in Geʿez. They are about the miracles performed by the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Before we go any farther, it's really important to understand that these stories have nothing to do with European missionaries. A

lot of people think that Christianity came to Africa with Europeans during colonialism. But, that's not true. Africans were the first Christians, and the people of highland Ethiopia have remained Christians since they converted in the 300s CE. These stories rise out of the African tradition of revering this woman, who is seen as not just the Mother of God, but of everyone who gets in trouble. No matter what you have done, in these stories, if you ask her to help you with respect and devotion, she will run to rescue you. In this article, we read a story about a girl who loses her eyesight due to too much reading. Don't worry! She gets it back, due to the women in her life, including Mary.

In "Judging a Book by its Cover: Geʿez Manuscripts and Scribal Practices," you will learn so many fascinating things about books written in Geʿez. This article is especially amazing because it shows you the dozens of things you can detect about a book written in Geʿez, even if you don't know a word of Geʿez! Isn't that cool? For instance, you can tell whether a Christian or a Muslim made the book. If someone ever hands you a book in Geʿez, you could amaze them by flipping to the middle of the book to find out if it switches from one column of writing to two columns. If it does, you can tell them that it is a Psalter, a famous book.

In "Lessons from Saint Yared's Life," you will learn about a famous Ethiopian musician and composer who lived a long time ago. When he was starting off in school, he had a hard time learning. But, one day he found himself studying a caterpillar and he decided to follow its example. He was part of innovating a totally different type of writing system, a system for writing down musical sounds, so someone reading it can follow along.

In "Practice Writing the Geʿez Alphabet," you will do some beautiful calligraphy in Geʿez.

You are going to learn a lot of new words in this issue; if you ever forget what one means, just go to the glossary at the end of this issue to remind yourself.

This issue was put together jointly by scholars at Howard University and Princeton University. On one side were members of the Princeton Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Egyptian Miracles of Mary (PEMM) project, including the authors Dr. Dawit Muluneh (Howard University), Dr. Jeremy R. Brown (Cataloger of Ethiopic Manuscripts at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library in Minnesota), and myself, a professor of African literature at Princeton University. On the other side were members of the Howard Center for African Studies, including Brenda Randolph, Vanessa Oyugi, and Ania Ueno. Joining us were the scholar Amsalu Tefere, a scholar of Geʿez literature, especially poetry, based in Miami and Aleme Tadesse, an Ethiopian artist based in Washington, DC. If you want to let us know your thoughts about any of the articles, or if you have any questions, feel free to write to us at **pemm@princeton.edu** or **africa@howard.edu**! Enjoy!

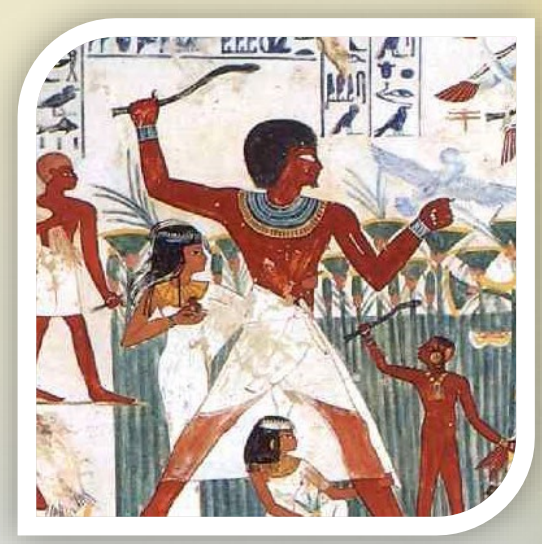
The Long History of Writing in Africa

By Oreen Yousef, Charles Riley, and Wendy Laura Belcher

Did you know that most of the world's oldest writing systems were created in Africa? For thousands of years, Africans have been inventing scripts—sets of drawn symbols for ideas, called characters. Let's explore these fascinating scripts!

Egyptian Hieroglyphic script (3200s BCE)

One of the first three scripts in the world was invented in Egypt. It was made up of pictures. For instance, a drawing of a foot meant "foot." This pictogram system of writing consisted of drawings of things, not sounds, and was called hieroglyphs. Almost all scripts are based on other scripts. (In fact, the letters used to write this article are based on a chain of other scripts going back to Egyptian hieroglyphs!) Hieroglyphs are based on even earlier Egyptian symbols for animals, plants, and activities. Later, some of those pictures came to stand for sounds. For instance, the hieroglyph for "foot" became the letter for the "b" sound at one point:



A detail from a mural in an Egyptian tomb. "TT52, the Tomb of Nakht and His Wife, Tawy Osirisnet." https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/53/Tomb_of_Nakht_%288%29.jpg

The Egyptian language was later written in the Coptic script, which is an alphabet adopted from Greek with some Egyptian symbols.

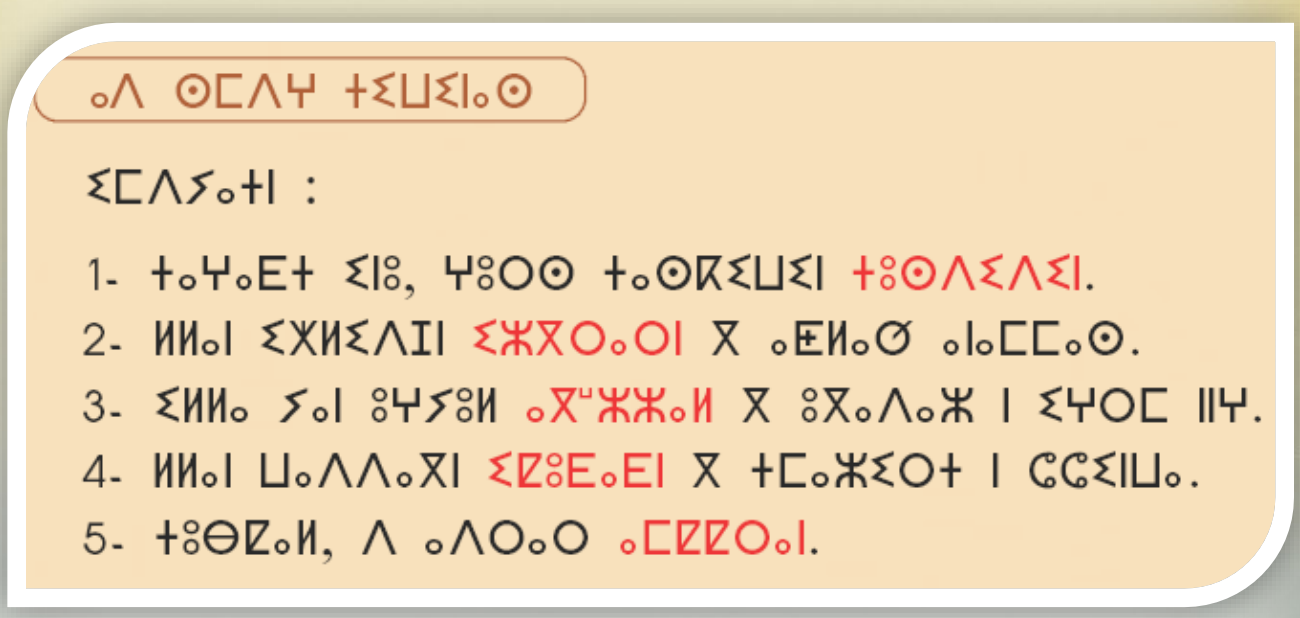
Tifinagh script (300s BCE)

⁚⋯ ⁝⁚⁚ⵔⵏ+ⴰⵍⵎ ⴻⵇⵉⵄⵋⵠⵡⵢ⵿

One of the earliest scripts anywhere in the world was the Libyco-Berber script, dating to the first millennium BCE and used all over North and West Africa. Libyco-Berber did not have characters for vowels. But, later, Africans developed the script into the Tifinagh script, which does write vowels. So, Tifinagh is an alphabetic system of writing, made up of characters called letters. Each letter represents an individual sound—both consonants and vowels. This script is used today to write the Amazigh language (which was called "Berber" in the past). It's fun to see how things changed.

Long ago, in Libyco-Berber, they wrote a "b" by drawing a circle with a dot inside. Today, in Amazigh, they draw a circle with a horizontal line in the middle.

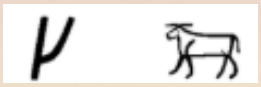
⊙⊖

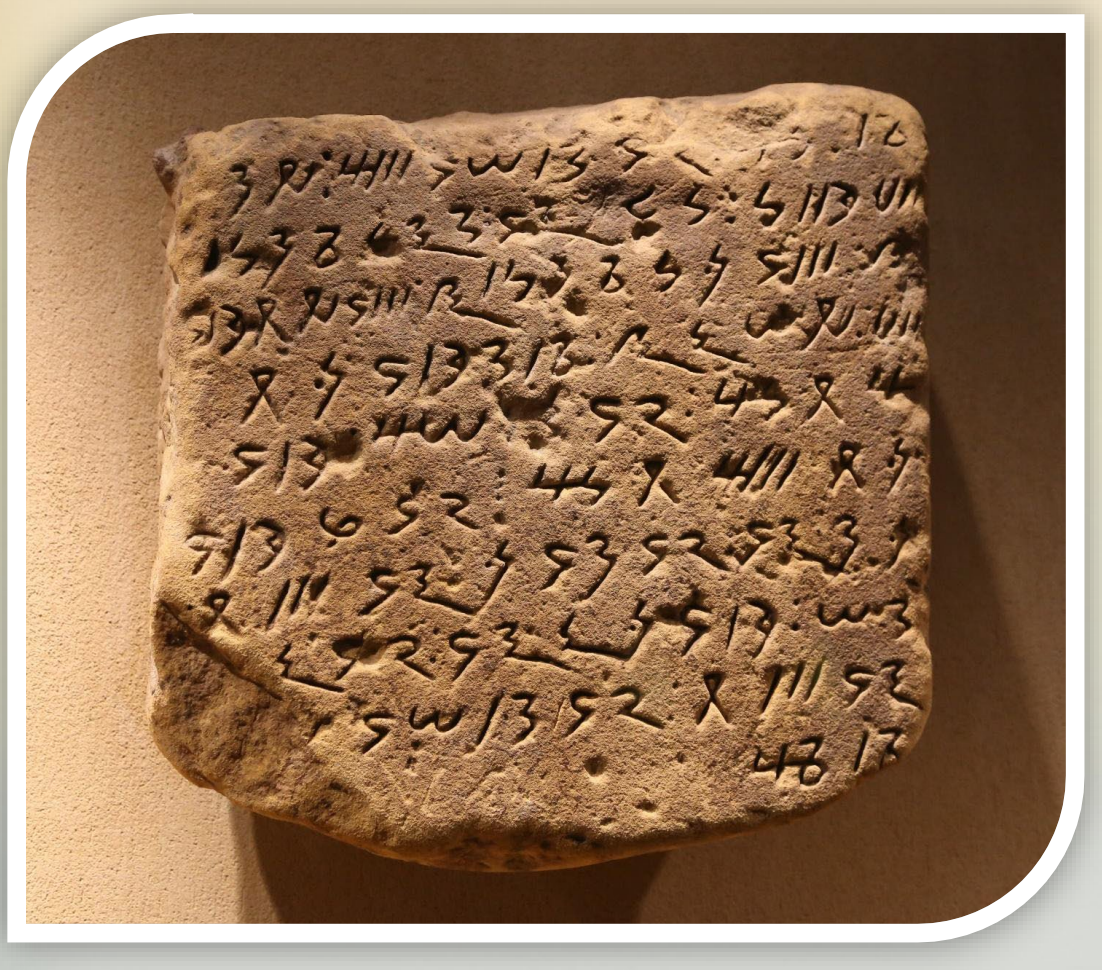


An example of Amazigh writing in a schoolbook.
Source: Saady, Youssef Es, et al. "Amazigh handwritten character recognition based on horizontal and vertical centerline of character." International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology 33.17 (2011): 33-50. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/An-example-of-a-Amazigh-Text-from-a-Schoolbook_fig6_228733517

Meroitic Script (300s BCE)

An ancient language and script that scholars are only beginning to understand is Meroitic, which was from Nubia which is now the country of Sudan. Very little has survived in this language and script; mostly just stone **inscriptions**. In this alphabet system of writing, to write a “b,” they drew a pronged stick. The shape of this letter was likely derived from the Egyptian hieroglyph for cow.

b(a) 



A first century CE cursive Meroitic inscription. From State Museum of Egyptian Art, Munich, MS. 2624., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meroitic_language#/media/File:Meroitische_Inschrift,_Meroe_1._Jh._n._Chr.,_Aegyptisches_Museum,_Muenchen-1.jpg

Ge'ez script (100s CE)

ሀለሐመሠረሰቀበተኀነአከወዐዘየደገጠጰጸፀፈፐ

In East Africa, the Geʿez language (sometimes called classical Ethiopic) was developed by Africans almost three thousand years ago. Then, two thousand years ago, they developed the Geʿez script to write their language. Ancient literature in this script and language survives mostly in inscriptions, but medieval and early modern literature in this language is known and vast. Ethiopians and Eritreans began to produce lots of texts in the 1300s, which continued all the way into the present. This script was also used to write other local languages, like Amharic and Tigrinya, beginning in the 1600s.

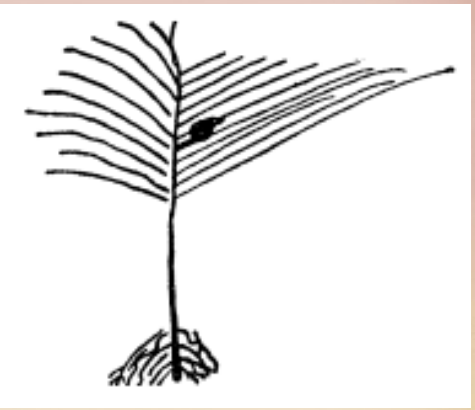
Geʿez is an abugida system of writing and not an alphabet. An abugida is a script that represents whole syllables, both a consonant and a vowel, not just one sound. An abugida uses a base letter to represent the consonant and adds little marks to indicate the vowel. This means that the letters for the "b" sound look very similar to each other. For instance, to symbolize a "ba" sound in Geʿez, draw a letter that looks like an upside-down "U". To write "bu," draw the same basic letter but add a little flute on the right.

በ	ቡ	ቢ	ባ	ቤ	ብ	ቦ
ba	bu	bi	bā	bē	be	bo

A modern-day Ethiopian scribe copying a manuscript in Geʿez onto parchment. Source: Photographed by Sean Winslow © 2009. From "Scribing, Gelawdiwos" at https://www.flickr.com/photos/larkvi/42920312664/in/album-72157629087469726

Nsibidi Script (400s CE)

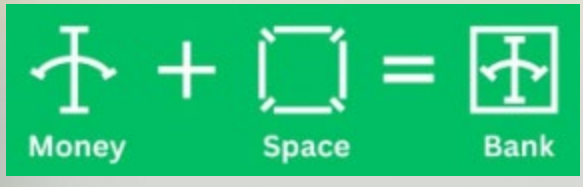
The Nsibidi script was invented by Africans in southeastern Nigeria long ago, between 400 CE and 1400 CE. It is a logogram writing system, similar to Chinese. For instance, if someone wants to write the word for “palm tree” in the Nsibidi script, they draw a character that looks like a tree.



Character for Palm tree. Source: Dayrell, Elphinstone. 1911. “Further Notes on 'Nsibidi Signs with Their Meanings from the Ikom District, Southern Nigeria.” The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland 41:521-540.

In the 21st century, Africans modernized the ancient Nsibidi script. It now includes many more characters. Logogram writing systems often combine characters to come up with new meanings. For example, look at the word for “seeds” below. Notice how it uses the modern Nsibidi character for “tree” and the idea of seeds’ roundness to create the word for “seeds.”

Not all characters in the Nsibidi writing system are logograms, characters that look like the objects in real life. Below is the word for “bank.” This character is created by putting the character for “money” (based on iron bars, which was what money used to be in West Africa) inside the character for “space”. This is clever because a bank is the “space” where “money” is kept.



Nsibidi symbols on a 1900s Nigerian cotton and indigeo textile. Source: Brooklyn Museum. https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/objects/125936

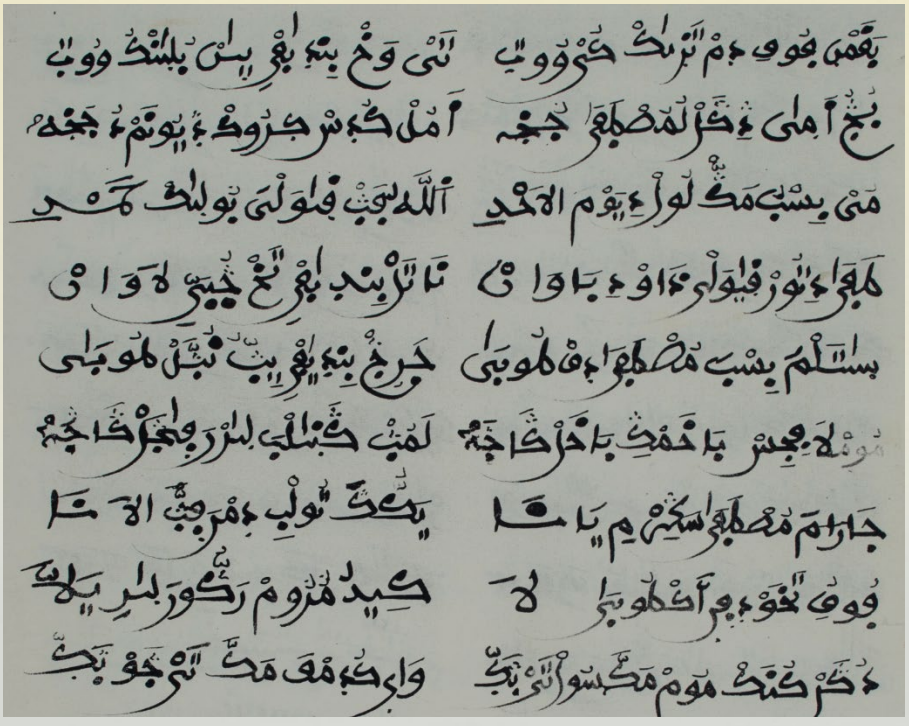
Ajami Script (1000s CE)

رَايُوَا بَبَّنْ رَبُو نَا | غُنْ مَسَابِى دُونْ شِدَيْنَا | تَرْسَشِنْ أَيْكِى نَ بَرْنَا | فَىْ دَ بُوىِ سِطَيْدَ سُنَّا | شِبِ أَللَّهْ بَادَكَنْغَرَا بَا

The Arabic script was invented in the early 300s CE and has been used all over the world to represent many different languages. Arabic is an abjad system of writing, which represents only consonants and not vowels.

Africans have adapted the Arabic writing system to write literature in their own languages. This writing system of adapted Arabic letters is called ajami. For instance, West Africans have been using ajami to write in Mandinka since at least the 1500s, in Hausa since the 1700s (as in the sample verse above), in Wolof and Fula since the 1800s, and so on. In East Africa, Africans have been using ajami to write in the Somali and Swahili languages for many centuries. Now, some African languages don't have a "b" sound (such as Mandinka), and people use Arabic differently for different languages, to write, but often a "b" will be written as:

ب

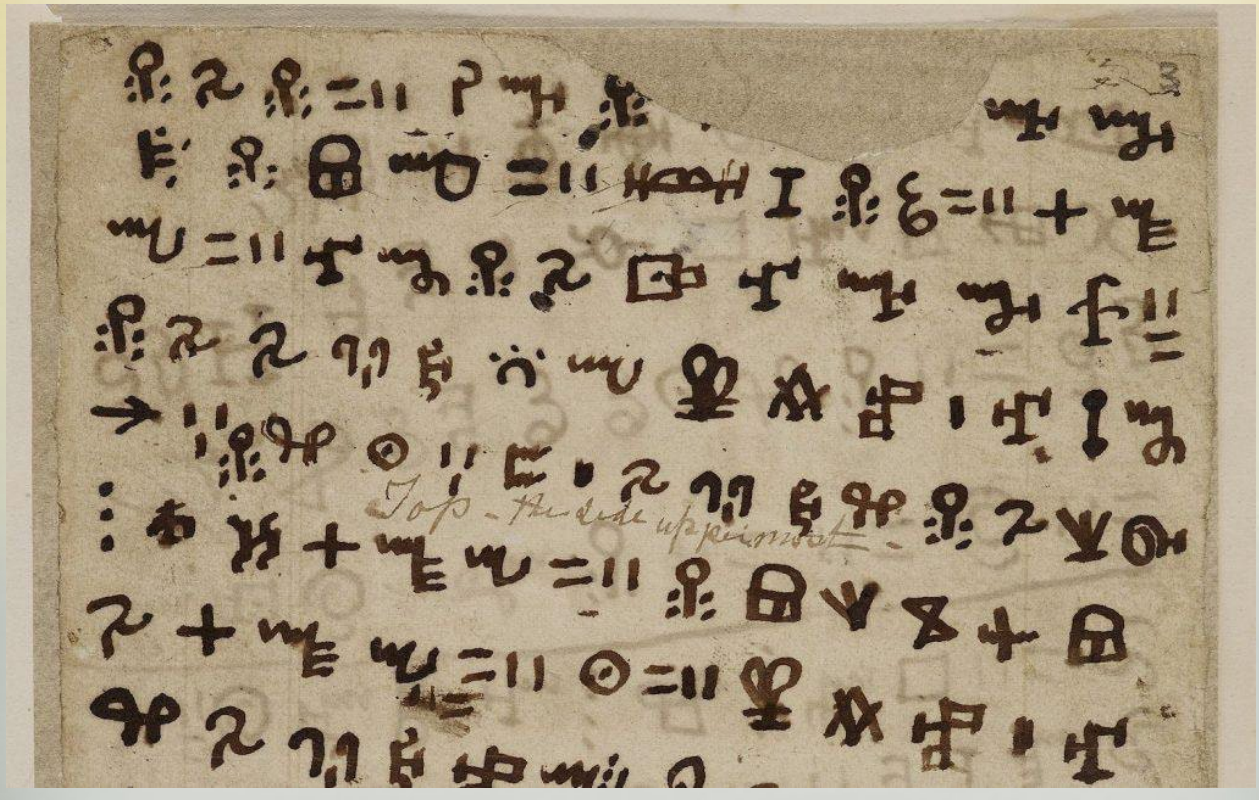


A copy of "Poem of the First Màggal" from Senegal in the Wolof language using ajami.
Source: Boston University Ajami Project, Principal Investigator Fallou Ngom. http://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/wolofalu-maggal-gu-njekk-gi/

Vai Script (1830s CE)

In the 1800s and 1900s, Africans invented dozens of scripts for their languages. One of these was the Vai script, which is a syllabary writing system. A syllabary is similar to an abugida (for example, the Geʿez script) but the syllables for the same consonants do not look alike. For instance, the letters that have a “b” sound in Vai do not look similar:

bee	bi	ba	boo	bu	bo	be



An example of Vai script dating to around 1850. Source: British Library. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:West_Africa_Vai_Document_Lores.jpg

Conclusion

Africans have developed many writing systems and used them to record their thoughts and stories for thousands of years. Lots of people do not know this, but now you do! And, you can help spread this knowledge.

Exercise

It's fun to write the Virgin Mary's name in African languages. Try copying the following letters:

ማርያም	(in Geʿez for "Māryām")
Ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ	(in Coptic for "Maria")
ⵎⴰⵔⵢⴰⵎ	(In neo-Tifinagh for "Maryam")

The Ancient African Language and Script of Ge'ez

By Dawit Muluneh

The Ezana Stone displays three scripts and languages, including Geʿez and Greek. Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezana_Stone

The Geʿez language spoken in highland Ethiopia has been written down for over 2,500 years. This ancient African language, also known as classical Ethiopic, is among the earliest to have been preserved in written form. Then, the people in the Horn of Africa developed the Geʿez script called *fidal* in the 200s CE. You can see it inscribed (carved) on ancient stone monuments by the emperors of Aksum, an ancient African empire in the northern region of modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. These monuments record the emperors' conquests and honor the divine.

One of the most important Geʿez **inscriptions** was made in honor of the Emperor Ezana. He ruled from the 320s through the 360s CE and was the first Christian emperor of Aksum.

The ancient stone obelisks of Aksum are some of the largest single stone monuments ever made. Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obelisk_of_Axum)

Ge'ez Coins

Between the 200s and 600s CE, ancient Geʿez appears on coins. Wazeba was the first ruler of Aksum to use Geʿez on coins, in the 310s CE. Then, Ezana minted silver and copper coins for local trade, with just Geʿez writing, and gold coins for international trade, with both Geʿez and Greek.

Sketch of a gold coin from King Wazeba's reign, with no cross.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aksumite_currency#/media/File:WazebaGe'ezLegend.png

A gold coin from King Ezana's reign, with a cross. One side has Geʿez and the other side has Greek.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aksumite_currency#/media/File:AXUM._Ezanas._Circa_330-360.jpg

Afro-Asiatic Language Family

Linguists often categorize languages into families, with each language in the family sharing distinctive features. The Geʿez language is part of the Afro-Asiatic language family, prevalent across Africa and the Middle East. Within this family is the Semitic subgroup, which includes Geʿez alongside languages like Arabic, Hebrew, and Syriac. Geʿez is different from them in several ways. Characteristically, Semitic scripts are written from right to left and include consonants but not vowels. Geʿez stands out as it is written from left to right, like English. And, in the ancient period, Geʿez began to be written with consonants and vowels. Some scholars

believe that trade interactions with India might have led Ethiopian **scribes** to integrate vowel markers, as the Indic script does.

Geʿez Script

The Geʿez script, also known as *fidal*, is a writing system called an **abugida**, in which each character represents a whole syllable, both a consonant and a vowel. Geʿez has 26 primary consonants, each with seven vowel variations, resulting in 182 unique characters. English, on the other hand, has only 26 characters, with just five vowels.

It might seem tough to learn how Geʿez marks consonants with vowels, but there is a pattern to it and you can become familiar with the basics. For instance, a scribe often indicates the vowel sound *e* by marking the base consonant character (the first form) with a little circle on the bottom right (the fifth form). Below, you see some examples in the fifth column. Of course, sometimes there is variation, depending on the shape of the consonant. But learning the typical marks for vowels can help you to memorize them all.

Marking Consonants with Vowels						
1st Form	2nd Form	3rd Form	4th Form	5th Form	6th Form	7th Form
ለ	ሉ	ሊ	ላ	ሌ	ል	ሎ
la	lu	li	lā	lē	le	lo
ሰ	ሱ	ሲ	ሳ	ሴ	ስ	ሶ
sa	su	si	sā	sē	se	so
መ	ሙ	ሚ	ማ	ሜ	ም	ሞ
ma	mu	mi	mā	mē	me	mo

Geʿez Language

The Geʿez language puts words in a different order than English. English usually puts the subject first, then the verb, and then the object: “the boy went home.” Geʿez usually switches the subject and verb: “went the boy home.”

Additionally, English requires a verb and often uses the verb “to be.” For instance, “the woman is a teacher.” Geʿez doesn’t have that verb and frequently has phrases or even sentences without any verb: “the woman teacher.”

In English, pronouns and objects are separate from the verb. For instance, “I blessed them” is three words. In Geʿez, the verb is conjugated (marked) and doesn’t need separate pronouns. So, it is one word: ተቀደስክዎን (I blessed them [a group of women]).

Geʿez Verb Forms					
ተቀደስኩ	I was blessed	ተቀደስክ ተቀደስኪ	You (boy) were blessed You (girl) were blessed	ተቀደሰ ተቀደሰት	He was blessed She was blessed
ተቀደስነ	We were blessed	ተቀደስክሙ ተቀደስክን	You all were blessed You all (girls) were blessed	ተቀደሱ ተቀደሳ	They were blessed They (girls) were blessed

Another intriguing aspect of Geʿez is the predictability of its word formations, with a standard pattern for generating new meanings. Most Geʿez words originate from a root of three or four consonants. For instance, the consonants ቀደሰ (Q-D-S) have to do with holiness. Words are then formed by marking the consonants with different vowels and, sometimes, by adding another consonant. For instance, if you put an *m* in front and mark the vowels differently, you get መቅደስ, which means “sanctuary.” Entire sentences can be constructed with words from the same root, like this one below, from ቀደሰ (Q-D-S).

ቅዱስ ቀደሰ ቅዳሴ በመቅደስ
Qeddus qaddasa qeddāsē ba-maqdas
The saint performed the liturgy in the sanctuary

A final special feature of Geʿez is that it uses pitch (high and low sounds) in an interesting way. A word can mean something else depending on whether you say it with a low sound or a rising sound (low to high). For instance, the word ባረከ (the sound “bārakā”) pronounced with a low tone means “he blessed her.” The same word pronounced with a rising tone means “they [women] blessed it.”

Geʿez has had an impact even beyond Ethiopia. Scholars have found Geʿez inscriptions in places like Egypt, a testament to ancient ecclesiastical connections between the two regions. Similarly, Geʿez inscriptions have been found in South Arabia, resulting from the Aksumite Emperor Kaleb's sixth-century expeditions into that region. Geʿez influenced local languages and even contributed to the vocabulary of the Quran. During the medieval period, Ethiopians even went to Europe and taught Europeans Geʿez, so that the first printed Geʿez book, of the Psalms, was published in the 1500s.

Conclusion

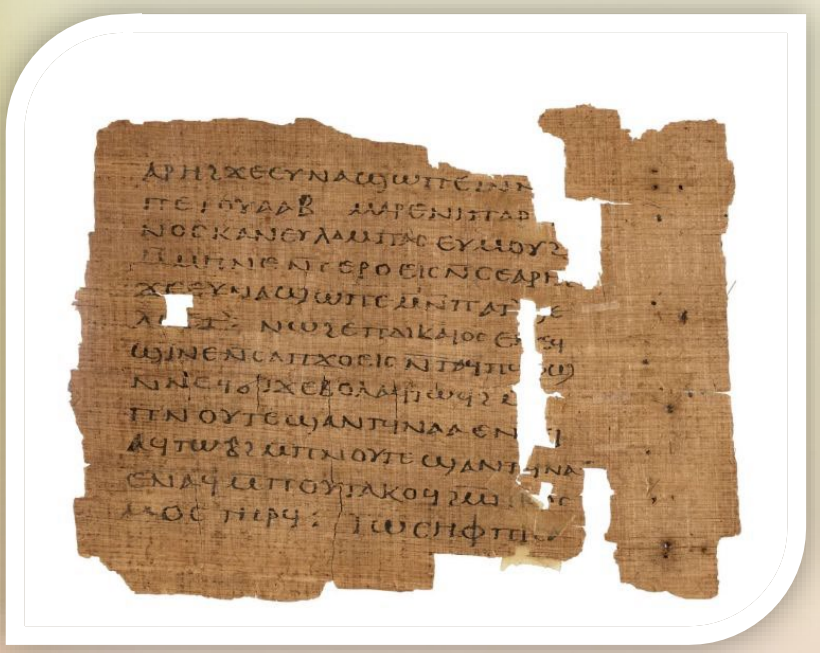
The Geʿez language is no longer spoken by most people. Like Latin, Geʿez lives on as a liturgical language, used by priests in orthodox churches in Ethiopia and Eritrea. However, the Geʿez script is in use every day, for modern African languages like Amharic and Tigrinya. Its prestige has also grown, with universities worldwide offering courses in Geʿez and Ethiopic Studies.

If you learn Geʿez, you are going to have a lot of fun. But you will also become part of one of the world’s longest written traditions. You will be part of challenging the lie that written African languages did not exist before European colonization. If you continue to study it, you might even help the world get access to these texts and Africa's rich and ancient linguistic heritage.

Ancient and Medieval Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts

By Brenda Randolph

The Copts are indigenous Egyptians who embraced Christianity a few decades after the death of Jesus Christ. Mark the Evangelist, one of Jesus' disciples, established the Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria, Egypt about 42 CE. Mark became the Bishop of Alexandria and is recognized as the founder of Christianity in Africa. Christianity grew quickly in Egypt. By early 300 CE, the majority of Egypt's population were Christians.



The Crosby-Schøyen Codex is one of the oldest biblical manuscripts in the world (250 to 350 CE), written in Coptic script on papyrus. Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, Genève, and Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MS-193_-_CROSBY-SCH%C3%98YEN_CODEX.webp

Coptic **scribes** played an important role in preserving religious texts. One of the oldest biblical manuscripts in the world is in Coptic script.

Copts built hundreds of Christian churches and monasteries in Egypt. Many were constructed on sites the Holy Family (Mary, Jesus, and Joseph) reportedly visited after their flight from Bethlehem, Judea. According to the Bible (Gospel of Matthew 2:16-18), King Herod the Great of Judea vowed to kill all Jewish boys in Bethlehem, ages 2 and under. A Jewish ruler appointed by Rome, Herod feared challenges to his authority from the prophesied "King of the Jews," the "Messiah." Historical records from the time do not corroborate the massacre of Hebrew boys and some scholars suggest the story is a parable. But sources from the time describe Herod as a ruthless leader

capable of such atrocities. He executed members of his own family, including his sons and his wife.

Today, pilgrims from around the world retrace the footsteps of the Holy Family in Egypt. People then and now report visions of The Virgin Mary along the route and describe the miracles she performed for the sick, disabled, or distraught. Saint Virgin Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo is one such site. In 976 CE, the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox church reported that The Virgin Mary appeared to him in a vision and answered his prayer to preserve the Christian church in an increasingly Muslim country. Coptic churches and monasteries were important manuscript production centers for the Miracles of Mary stories.

Statuette of Isis with the infant Horus, made in the 330s BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/5483

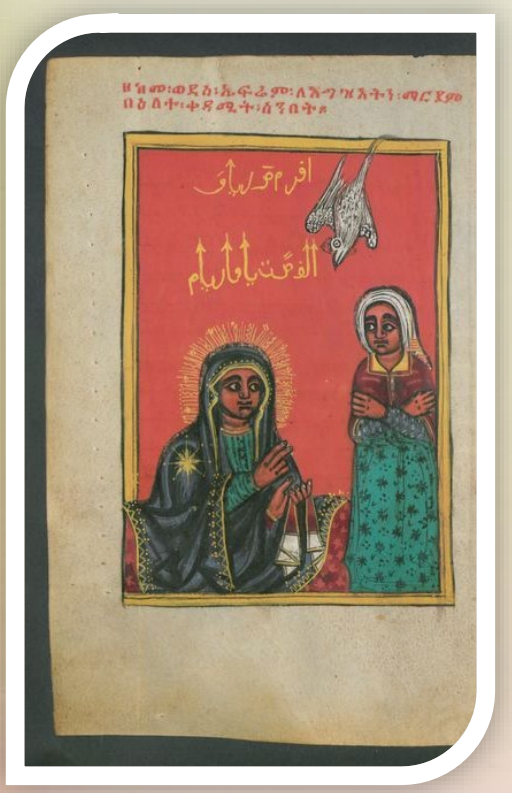
The significant role that Mary played in Egypt's early Coptic Church is not surprising. The prominence of Isis and other Egyptian goddesses in ancient Egypt may have predisposed the Egyptians to accept a powerful woman as a religious figure. For example, art historians have pointed to similarities between depictions of the goddess Isis nursing her son Horus and Mary nursing the infant Jesus.

In the centuries following the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 CE, Islam and the Arabic language became dominant in Egypt. The Coptic language ceased to be publicly spoken and became a liturgical language used in the Orthodox Coptic Church.

Arabic Manuscripts

Christianity and Islam are both Abrahamic religions. Like Judaism, both Coptic Christians and Muslims recognize Abraham as the first prophet. They also share commonality in their veneration of The Virgin Mary. As the Quran notes, “O Mary, indeed Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds” (3:42). During the medieval period and beyond, Copts and Muslims produced manuscripts in their respective languages about The Virgin Mary. Some manuscripts combined both languages.

The nativity in a manuscript written in both Coptic (on the left) and Arabic (on the right). British Library. Gospels. Egypt, 1663. Or. 1316, f 117r.



A poet praising Mary, with captions in both Geʿez (in orange) and Arabic (in yellow). Berlin Staatsbibliothek Manuscript No. 74, f. 35r, https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN880986085&PHYSID=PHYS_0077&DMDID=DMDLOG_0008

Arabic Manuscripts about the Virgin Mary arrive in Ethiopia

In the 1300s, Egyptian manuscripts in Arabic about the Virgin Mary arrived at the court of King Dawit I in Ethiopia. They included stories about The Virgin Mary’s life but also about the miracles she performed from heaven for the faithful who called upon her. Scribes working in the king’s **scriptorium** translated the Arabic manuscripts into Geʿez and created new manuscripts. Many Ethiopians were inspired to tell stories about what the Virgin Mary had done for them, creating many new stories and paintings in manuscripts, all the way into the 1900s.

Judging a Book by its Cover: Geʿez Manuscripts and Scribal Practices

By Jeremy R. Brown

Ethiopia and Eritrea are two of the few remaining places in the world where **scribes** continue to make books by hand. This tradition stretches back well over a thousand years, in both the Orthodox Christian community and the Muslim community.

A person can learn a lot about a manuscript, the scribe who copied it, and the community that used it without having to know a single word of the text in that manuscript. **Codicology** is the name for the study of the physical elements of a **codex**, or book.

Let's find out what you can know!

Covers

You don't even have to open a manuscript to begin to understand who it was made for. Some are made for the poor, some for the rich. For both, Geʿez manuscripts almost always have wood board covers. You can often still see the tool marks from chisels and other tools. By the way, the abbreviation for "manuscript" is "MS" (for one manuscript) and "MSS" (for multiple manuscripts).

Cover exhibits hand tool marks as well as holes from insects and the marks of fungi in the wood, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 53. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203172

Cover exhibits a repair to a cracked board, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS. 176. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203236

But some manuscripts are more deluxe, made for wealthy **patrons**. They have boards wrapped in leather. Some wrappings are simple, with plain leather stretched around the binding of the manuscript. But some can be amazingly ornate, with leather stamped with borders, geometric designs, and even crosses and churches. The leather beautifies the manuscript but also protects the spine.

Unstamped leather over the wood board covers, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 101. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203207

Stamped leather with a cross, Princeton Ethiopic MS 44. https://dpul.princeton.edu/msstreasures/catalog/c247dw89m

The addition of braided bands of leather, where the folios meet the spine, provide further protection.

Leather headband, Howard University School of Divinity Tweed Codex MS 017.
https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/875157

Finally, some scribes choose to leave the inside covers bare. Other scribes create a pastedown by inserting fabric, parchment, or paper there. In very rare cases, the scribe will glue a mirror to the inside of the cover.

So, when you look at a cover, you can tell a lot about who it was made for. Simpler covers for everyday people and deluxe covers for rulers and wealthy patrons.

Wood visible between the pastedowns, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 247. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203255

Fabric between the pastedowns, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 422. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203319

Mirror in a niche in a back cover, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project MS 464. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203362

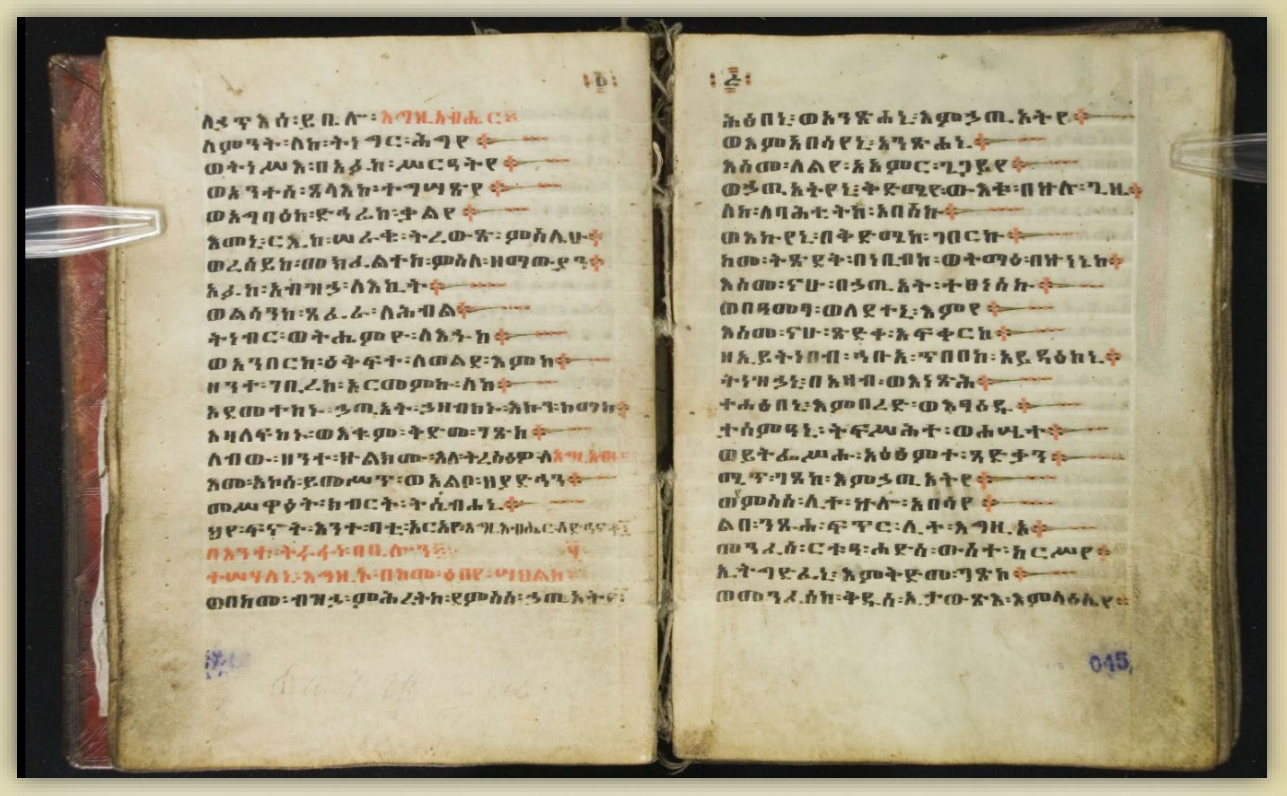
Quires

Geʿez manuscripts are copied on parchment not paper. Almost always, parchment is made from goat skins that have been stretched, cleaned, and prepared for writing. The prepared parchments are then cut into sheets. Several sheets, most often four to six, are stacked and then folded in half to make a booklet called a quire.

Quires bound with a chain-stitch, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 17. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203122

As you know, it is tough to write in a straight line. So, the scribes help themselves by pressing (scoring) lines into the folios. They mark horizontal lines to form the block for text and vertical lines to mark the margins.

Holes are also poked through the quires so that multiple quires can be stitched together to form the body of the manuscript. To help them keep track of where they are, scribes sometimes write numbers on the first folio of each quire.



On the left folio, at the top right corner, you can see a quire number to mark the end of quire 4. On the right folio, at the top left corner, you can see a quire number to mark the beginning of quire 5. Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 109.. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/200007

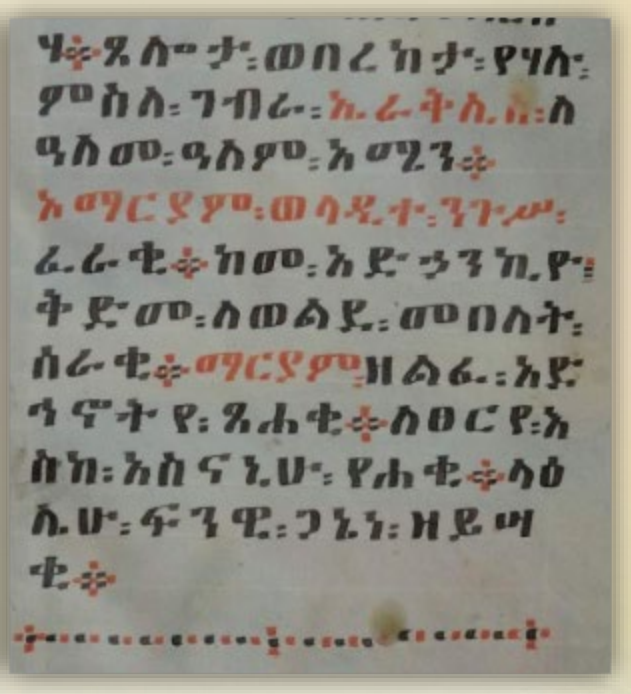
Text and Layout

Even if you can't read the language of Geʿez, you can understand a lot about the manuscript from studying the letters in a Geʿez manuscript.

For instance, holy or important names in a text are commonly written in red ink, called a rubric. If you see one or two words in red, you will know that those are the names of saints, kings, patriarchs, and patrons. If you know just one word, ማርያም (Māryām), you will often be able to find it in red. You can see her name on a folio from Gunda Gunde Monastery MS 44 below.

Red ink is also often used for the first lines of a text. Since many manuscripts have many texts, you can skim for red lines of text to identify the opening of each new text. Red is also used for punctuation.

Red ink used for a section heading (top left), Gunda Gunde Monastery MS 137. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/133111



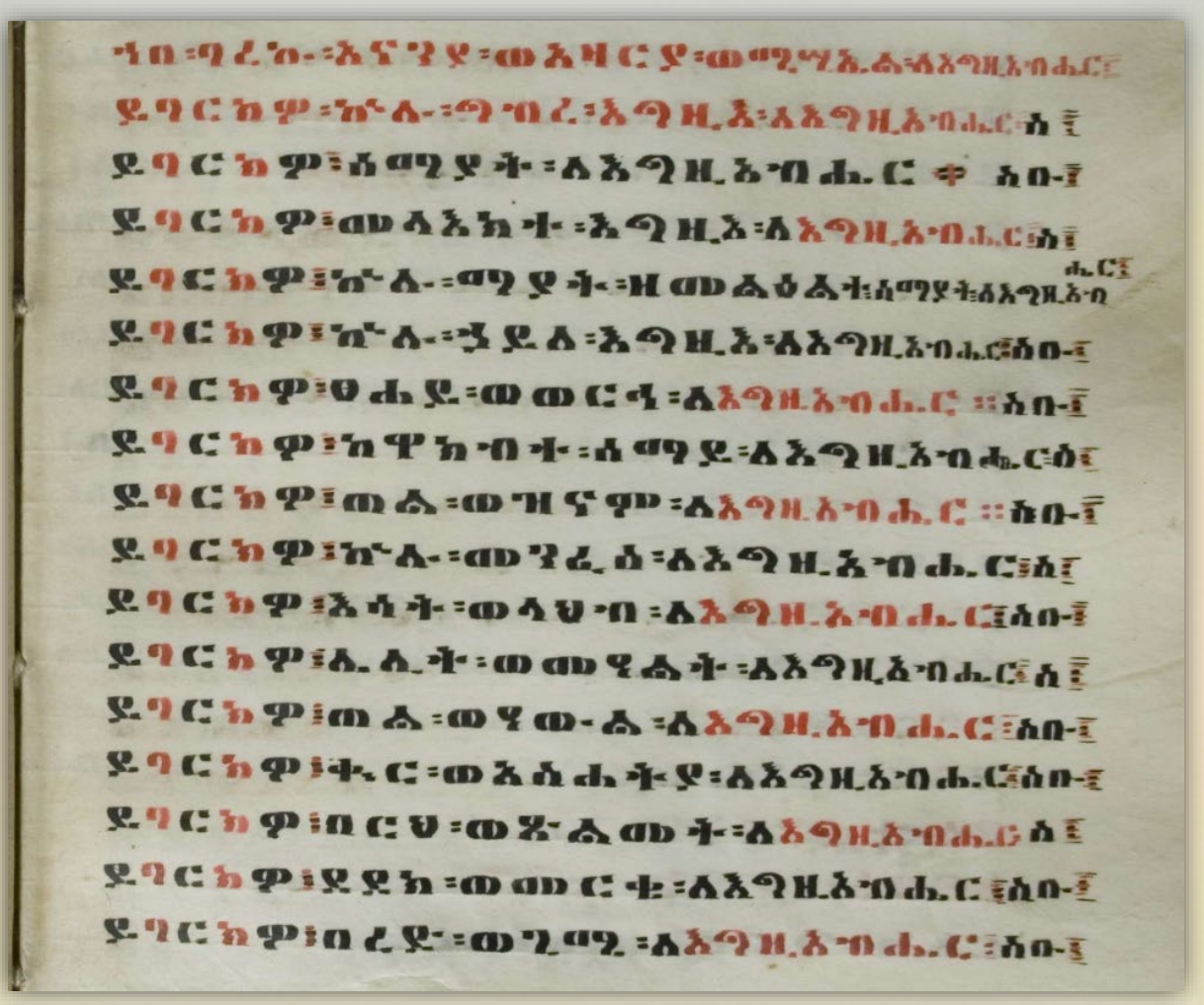
Red ink being used in a variety of ways: as the punctuation mark ፠, the patron's name ኤራቅሊስ, the section header ኦማርያም፡ ወለዲተ፡ ንጉሥ, the name of the Virgin Mary ማርያም, and a section divider of alternating red and black dots, Gunda Gunde Monastery MS 44. ttps://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/789557

The number of columns in a Geʿez manuscript can tell you a lot. Geʿez manuscripts have one, two, or three columns of text (see below). In most manuscripts, the number of columns will be consistent throughout the entire manuscript even if there are several different works copied within.

However, one exception is the **Psalter**, which is the most copied Geʿez manuscript. If you came across several Geʿez manuscripts, probably a third would be Psalters. And you would be able to tell which were Psalters due to their alternating number of columns. The Psalter has five works, including the biblical book of Psalms, some songs taken from the Old and New Testaments, the biblical book of the Song of Solomon (also known as the Song of Songs), and two long Ethiopian hymns. In most Psalters, the first three works are copied in a single column with a ragged (uneven) right margin. Then the final two works of the Psalter are copied in two columns with a justified (even) right margin.

Transition from one column to two columns in a Psalter, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 109. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/200007

Another way you could tell whether a Geʿez manuscript was a Psalter is the use of alternating red and black ink in columns. They use this most for Psalm 148, Psalm 150, and the 10th biblical canticle, where the first word of each line of the song is the same. Many scribes will highlight this repeated use of the initial word on the line by switching back and forth between red and black ink.



Columnetric red and black ink in the 10th biblical canticle of the Psalter. Also, notice that the word እግዚአብሔር (God) is written in red ink. Institute of Ethiopian Studies 4. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203118

Decorative Designs and Paintings

Colorful woven designs and evocative paintings called **illuminations** are features of many Geʿez manuscripts.

In fact, two of the oldest Bibles with paintings come from Ethiopia, the Abbā Garimā Gospels, which you can see at https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132897. These two manuscripts demonstrate that the incorporation of art into Geʿez manuscripts stretches from the very beginning of the manuscript tradition to the present day.

Ḥarag with crosses, Gunda Gunde Monastery MS 153. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/534475

Ḥarag of the 19th century royal scriptorium, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 240. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203247

The most common artistic element in a Geʿez manuscript is an interwoven decorative design called a *ḥarag*, which means “vine tendril.” The color palette and styles have changed and adapted over the centuries, with some time periods featuring reds and oranges while other time periods showcase blues and greens. Sometimes angels, people, crosses, flowers, and

birds are incorporated into the *ḥarag*. What stays consistent over time and geography is the common interlocking design that so closely resembles a growing vine.

Ḥarag with birds and a person, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 8. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203120

Ḥarag with flowers, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 31. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/203134

A *ḥarag* is a more common feature in a Geʿez manuscript than a full-page painting. Due to the expense of hiring a painter, illuminations are more likely to appear in manuscripts commissioned by civil and religious leaders and also by wealthy patrons who would then donate the manuscript to a church.

The most painted scene is that of Mary holding the baby Jesus in her lap, often called the Madonna and Child. Other common paintings include Saint George spearing a dragon, the Crucifixion of Jesus, and portraits of the four gospel writers.

Madonna and Child attended by two angels while a patron bows at their feet, Princeton Ethiopic MS. 65. https://dpul.princeton.edu/msstreasures/catalog/12579w78f

Saint George spears a dragon, Gunda Gunde Monastery 53. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/789564

Comparison between Geʿez and Arabic manuscripts

As mentioned, Ethiopia and Eritrea are home to Christian manuscript traditions in Geʿez and Muslim manuscript traditions in Arabic. Again, even if you don't know Geʿez or Arabic, you can tell which is which from their distinctive features.

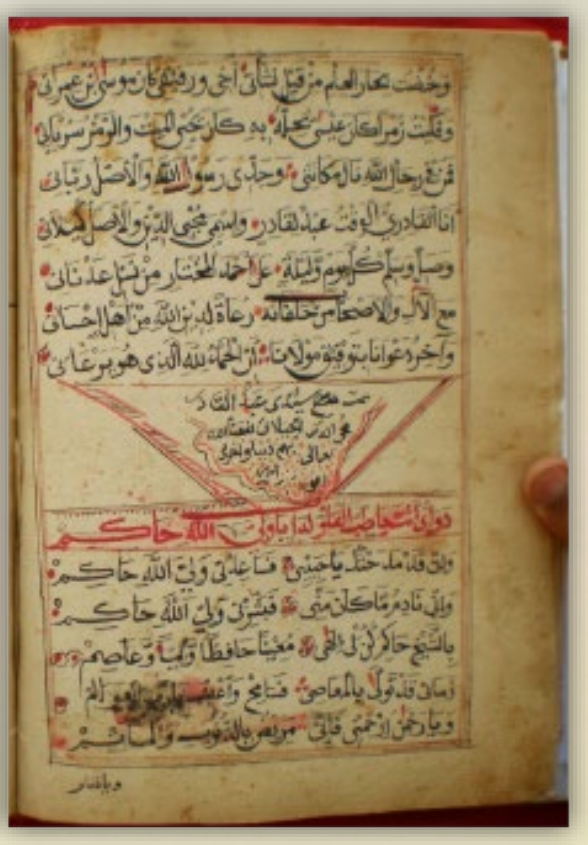
For instance, Geʿez manuscripts use wooden boards that can then be wrapped with leather. But Arabic manuscripts do not use wood at all, but layers of leather glued together. Also, many Arabic manuscripts include a leather flap that folds over the fore-edge of the book to protect the edges of the pages, a feature not found in Geʿez manuscripts. Moreover, although stamped leather is found in both manuscript traditions, the styles and designs are distinct.

Stamped leather cover with flap to protect pages, in Sherif Harar City Museum Arabic manuscript, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project MS 1343. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/527071

Stamped leather cover with flap to protect pages, in Sherif Harar City Museum Arabic manuscript, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project MS 1353. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/527081

The differences become even more noticeable once the covers are opened. While Geʿez manuscripts are copied on parchment, Arabic manuscripts are copied on paper. Even if you can't read the text, you can see that the script used for Geʿez is very different from that used for Arabic. Geʿez is written in block style and Arabic is written in cursive. Interestingly, Geʿez and Arabic manuscripts both rely on black and red ink for the majority of manuscripts.

Red and black ink, Sherif Harar City Museum Arabic manuscript, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project MS 1385.
https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/527113



Red and black ink, Sherif Harar City Museum Arabic manuscript, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project MS 1445.
https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/527173.

Arabic manuscripts from Ethiopia and Eritrea are primarily copied in a single column. When it has two columns, it is usually a work of poetry.

Poetry in two columns, Sherif Harar City Museum Arabic manuscript, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project MS 1745.
https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/527473

Paintings and icons are not a part of the Arabic manuscript tradition in Ethiopia and Eritrea. But, like the ḥarag in Geʿez manuscripts, Arabic manuscripts often have beautiful decorative designs. These are especially common on the first pages of Quran manuscripts.

Decorative borders, Sherif Harar City Museum Arabic manuscript, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project MS 1353. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/527081

Decorative borders, Sherif Harar City Museum Arabic manuscript, Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project 1354. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/527082

Conclusion

The manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrean offer up glimpses of religious communities that have thrived there for well over a thousand years. Although not everyone is able to read the texts inside these manuscripts, everyone can understand aspects of these manuscripts through the lens of codicology. Most importantly, through this lens, you can appreciate the skill and investment that went into creating these manuscripts and the important role they play within the communities that copy them.

Ḥarag for the beginning of the biblical book of Ezekiel, Institute of Ethiopian Studies MS 721. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/201868

Ancient and Medieval Literature in the Ge'ez Language and Script

By Amsalu Tefera, Wendy Laura Belcher, Jeremy R. Brown, Dawit Muluneh

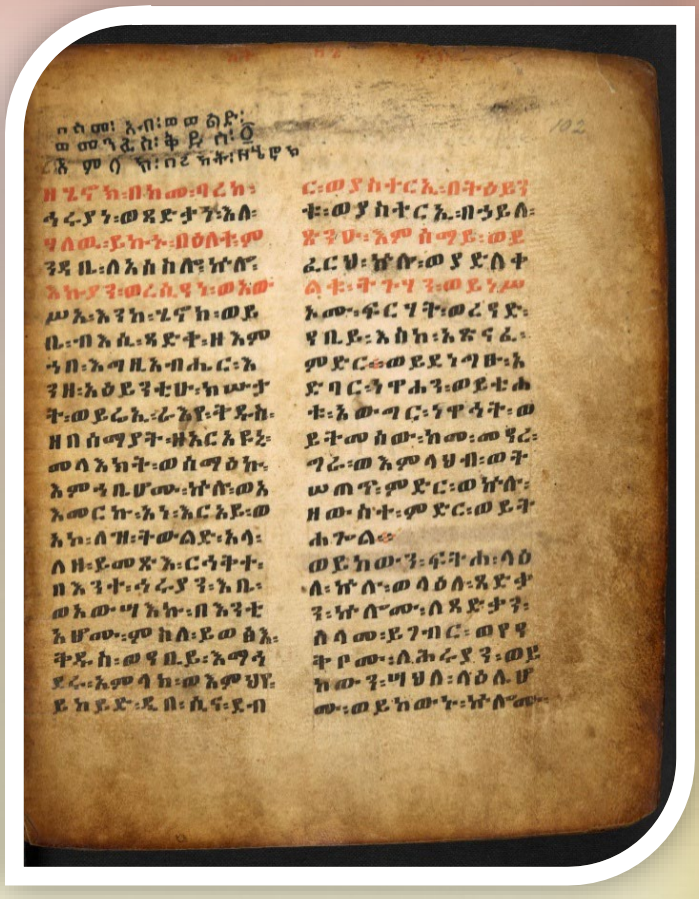
Thousands of texts are in the Geʿez language. Some were composed 2,000 years ago, some 100 years ago. Some were translated into Geʿez, but most were composed in Geʿez. And they come in dozens of genres. Space does not allow us to name all the specific biographies, poetry, stories, chronicles, and books of theology and philosophy composed in Geʿez, but here is a little bit about them.

Portrait of the Apostle Luke in a 1401 CE manuscript commissioned by Princess Zir Gānēlā, Morgan Library. Photo by Ewa Balicka-Witakowska.

Translated into Geʿez

- The Old and New Testaments were translated into Geʿez soon after the country's conversion to Christianity in the 300s CE. Many of its books, especially the four Gospels, are frequently copied to this day.
- The *Psalter*, a book of songs from the Bible, is found in every monastery and church. Many priests and believers have a personal copy to use as the basis for their personal daily prayers.

- The *Book of Enoch* is a famous ancient biblical text found in its entirety only in Ethiopia.
- The *Gospel of John* and the *Letters of John* are popular, often used to teach children and young deacons.
- The *Missal* and the *Book of Hours* have the wording used to conduct daily church services.
- Books to conduct the church rituals of baptism and marriage are available in every church.
- The *Book of the Lives of Saints* (called "Synaxarium") is a collection of summaries of saints' biographies, especially those who died for the faith.
- The *Faith of the Desert Fathers* (called "Hāymānota Abaw") contains theological commentary by Egyptian theologians of the 200s and 300s CE.
- The *Kebra Nagast* is a quasi-biblical text narrating that the King Solomon of Israel and the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba had a son who took the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia. All Ethiopian kings from 1270 to 1974 CE have claimed to be descended from King Solomon's Ethiopian son.



Page from the Book of Enoch.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Enoch

Composed in Geʿez

- A book of songs by the Askumite composer Saint Yared is used to perform worship in Ethiopian churches. It comes with a unique Ethiopian system of musical notation.
- Biographies (called "gadl") narrate the lives and struggles of individual saints. Around 200 have been composed in Geʿez about local saints, including stories of miracles performed by the saint and hymns celebrating them. At least six of them are written about Ethiopian women saints, including one about the saint Walatta Petros, which you can read in English translation.
- The Royal Chronicles document the lives and achievements of the Ethiopian kings, starting in the 1300s. Usually written during the king's lifetimes, they are vital historical

sources for understanding Ethiopian history. One of the most famous is called *The Glorious Victories of King Amda Seyon,* who lived from 1314-1344.

- The *Hatata Inquiries* were two books of philosophy composed in Ethiopia in the 1600s by Zara Yaqob and Walda Heywat. They are investigations into the nature of human reason.
- *The Book of Mystery* is a masterpiece of theology written by Giyorgis of Sagla in the late 1300s, and still much copied and quoted today.
- *The Miracles of Mary* contains hundreds of stories of how Our Lady Mary has protected the faithful who call upon her. You can read them at http://pemm.princeton.edu.
- Healing prayers are written on **scrolls** to protect the owner against illness or to ensure a longer life. Many of them were created for women and children.

If you take the time to find and read some of these amazing books, you will be amazed by all you will learn about the history, culture, and religion of highland Ethiopia. They illuminate local traditions and the interactions among Africans.

Healing & Justice: The Virgin Mary in African Literature and Art

By Wendy Laura Belcher

The Virgin Mary is the world's most storied person.

That is, she is the human being about whom the most stories have ever been composed. People in Israel and Syria first did so, in the second century. Then people in Egypt did, by the end of the second century. Then, the practice spread around the world—of composing stories about the miracles she performed over the centuries for the faithful who called upon her name.

The Virgin Mary being crowned the Queen of Heaven. Ethiopian Manuscript Digital Archive Manuscript No. 10, s. 9a (1800s). https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/138172

You might think this unsurprising. After all, devotion to her has been vital in two world religions for almost two thousand years—Christianity and Islam—and over a billion now pray to her.

But consider that few have composed stories about the miracles performed over the last thousand years by Jesus Christ. Or Mohammed. Or the Buddha. They have not inspired post-life stories the way that the Virgin Mary has.

In this sense, Mary is not just a religious figure, she is humanity's most remarkable literary character, appearing in more original compositions in more languages by more authors over more countries over more centuries than any other. She is also one of the most painted or most illustrated human beings ever.

As a result, Marian stories (that is, stories about Mary) are a rare body of literature and art, about one character across continents, languages, and periods, illuminating how different cultures make sense of the human. Lots of work has been done on the European Marian stories and artwork. They began to emerge much later, in the 1000s, after those from the Levant (Middle east, including Egypt) were translated into Latin in the 600s.

But many do not know that Africa has also been a site for some of the earliest and most vital Marian folk stories. Thousands of them have been composed in Africa since the 300s. Although the practice of writing stories about her began in Jerusalem, and was developed in Egypt, it also spread quickly to Nubia and highland Ethiopia.

Highland Ethiopians have been creating bound books, what we call manuscripts, since the 600s. First these books were translations from Greek, such as the New Testament, and since at least the 1200s they have been writing their own compositions in Geʿez. Indeed, highland Ethiopia has eight centuries of original written texts: written by Africans, for Africans, in an African language, about Africans.

In the 1400s, after many centuries of translating Egyptian stories from Arabic, Ethiopians began to add their own stories about what the Virgin Mary had done for them in Ethiopia. By the 1500s and 1600s, Ethiopians had added hundreds of stories about the power of one woman to heal the world and deliver justice. They continued doing so well into the twentieth century.

In highland Ethiopia, these stories about Mary appear in a text often called *Taʾammera Māryām* (The Miracles of Mary), but the full name is

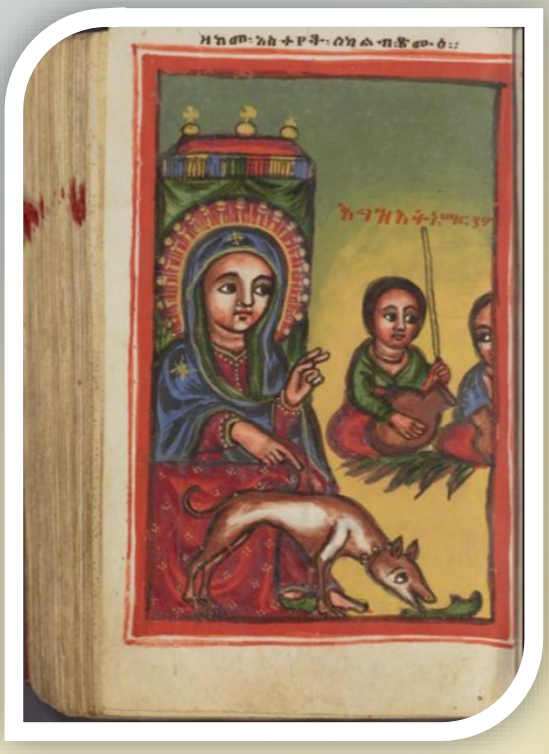
መጽሐፈ፡ ተአምሪሃ፡ ለእግዝእትነ፡ ቅድስት፡ ድንግል፡ በክልኤ፡ ማርያም
Maṣḥafa Taʾammerihā la-ʔgzeʾtena Qeddest Dengel ba-kelʾē Māryām
The Book of the Miracles of Our Lady, the Holy Two-Fold Virgin, Mary

Although often called a book or a text, *Taʾammera Māryām* is best understood as a library, one that holds hundreds of stories and thousands of manuscripts. That is, no *Taʾammera Māryām* contains all the stories, and few have the same stories in the same order.

We invite you to explore this richness at the Princeton Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Egyptian Miracles of Mary (PEMM) project website, which posts many of these stories and paintings. Find out all the ways that Africans have depicted the Virgin Mary as central, special, and preeminent.

How to Read the Stories

Some of the stories are very dramatic. They show Mary saving many from being taken to hell by demons, even wicked people like cannibals. They show her saving people from storms and dragons, giving water to thirsty dogs, healing the sick, finding what's been lost, protecting the weak from the dastardly, and aiding kings in battle. These stories, some of which are read aloud in church, aid the faithful in remembering that no sin is too great for her power and no plea too late for her mediation. But mostly, these are great stories with lots of startling plot turns and memorable characters.



Mary giving water to a thirsty dog. Princeton University Library Manuscript No. 57, f. 152 (1700s). https://dpul.princeton.edu/msstreasures/catalog/44558h891

These stories may appear simple, but they are so rich and dense with meaning that unpacking them takes time and care. Let's look at one of them, a story about a girl who goes blind due to too much reading.

The hugely popular story of "The Nile Girl" is very old (appearing in manuscripts from the 1400s), and most likely composed in Egypt.

The story opens with a mother sending her seven-year-old daughter to a nun who will teach her to read and study religious books. As modern people, we are likely to skim right past these plain facts. But, think about it. In Ethiopia, for the past six centuries, every girl would hear this positive message about girls' education. She would hear that a smart girl might be sent to study. And, moreover, that a trained, learned woman existed who could teach her. Women

studying and teaching is the norm. Many places in the world, little girls would not have heard that positive message.

The little girl's study was intensive. She didn't just memorize the Psalms of David—as most Ethiopian children begin to do at the age of seven. She was sent to study the heavyweights, the densest and most important books: the sixteen Old Testament books about the Prophets (such as Isaiah, Daniel, Hosea) and the twenty Lives of the Apostles. Even if you don't know these books, you can see that they are many. We know that the amount of reading she did was extraordinary because of what happens next.

After the girl completed reading all of these books, "her eyes were darkened." Understandably, the mother is very upset about this turn of events, her daughter losing her sight, and begs the Virgin Mary to heal her. One night not long after, the mother has a dream in which she sees Mary "walking above the river in the air" surrounded by angels. This story is localized with one perfect detail, that the Nile's waves come right up house. If you were assigned in a writing class to give one telling detail, you could give one no better than this. Modern stories are filled with description. These stories have almost none.

In the dream, the mother leaps up, seizes her daughter, races to the window, and does something shocking: she throws her daughter out the window, yelling at the divine mother, "Take her! You gave me a blind daughter!"

The girl's mother does not approach Mary with fearful reverence, as one would a patriarchal father, but with the intimate and impatient demands one makes of a mother. This mother clearly thinks Mary is failing at her job to help people, not test them.

As is proper for a parable, the story leaves veiled what the mother was thinking as she flung her daughter. Did she do so in full confidence that Mary would let no harm come to her daughter? Or simply to rid herself of this responsibility? Either way, the girl is caught and healed and returned.

To a modern reader, the story's attitude toward disability is disturbing and the mother's action is alarming. Of course, we know that in the medieval period a blind girl was likely to become a life-long responsibility, and to require more labor not the reprieve from labor that a child was supposed to promise. Nevertheless, mothers are not supposed to throw away their children. Blind or otherwise!

But, with the wisdom of a parable, the mother's dream reveals something profound about care. It's a burden. Any caretaker will tell you that. And, in the middle of the night, an exhausted caretaker may well dream of returning this burden to the divine. Of dramatically

detaching from the leash of care. Indeed, the story depends for its charge on two essential aspects of care—the immobility that care often imposes on the caregiver, restricting their movement, keeping them at home, and the invisibility of it. How freeing for a caretaker to imagine this moment of extreme mobility—hurling their burden out into the air. How gratifying to externalize it, cast it out of the home into visibility. And, perhaps, underneath that painful charge, there remains a wistful hope on the part of a loving mother for her similarly immobilized child to fly.

Fortunately, the story does not end there, with the reality of how care entraps. Rather, it ends with relational repair. When the mother wakes up exclaiming, the daughter also awakens. Blessedly unaware that her mother has psychically thrown her away mere moments before, the daughter's first action is to kiss her mother. Another tiny and perfect detail.

Now, perhaps the story is a little too on the nose when it has a mother-in-law ask her daughter-in-law if she is crazy. But, however unfeeling the mother-in-law may or may not be, she is there. She is present. And she is the only one. No men appear at all in the story, much less to help, whether fathers or husbands, or saints or Gods. This story intends to suggest that there is something gendered about care, whether human or divine.

So, the girl's mother insists she has not lost her mind, lights a lamp, and then does something interesting. She goes in search of threads of red, white, and green silk. She then holds them in front of her daughter and, miraculously, the girl can see the threads and distinguish their colors. Of course, the whole house rejoices.

But we as modern readers may not rejoice. For we began with a girl reading books and end with a girl reading threads. The mother does not show her daughter a book to identify if her sight has returned. She has learned her lesson. She shows her daughter the elements of women's traditional work: threads for sewing. I worry that this story has a sting in its tail for the smart girl listening to it. I would love to hear you read that differently. Perhaps the ability to distinguish threads from each other is a different type of reading, interpretation? Perhaps it is an entry into the more vibrant world of color from the black and white of texts? Or that, studying has its harms, but Mary will save you if your mother loves you?

Lessons from Saint Yared's Life

By Aleme Tadesse and Brenda Randolph

According to the tradition, on April 25, 505 CE, a boy named Yared was born near Aksum. Aksum was then the capital city of the Aksumite Empire, famous for its impressive monuments, unique written script, and vibrant culture. Bustling with life, the city had traders from all over the world, including Egypt, South Arabia, the Byzantine Empire, the Middle East, India, and China. Yared grew up in this thriving, complex society rich in religious and cultural history. His life and work would mirror the magnificent and spiritual depth of the Aksumite Kingdom at its height.

Yared watching the caterpillar. Watercolor by Aleme Tadesse.

Yared's Moment of Inspiration

When Yared was six or seven, he was sent to a church school to study under a teacher named *Abba* Gideon. But Yared had difficulty learning even the basics and was made fun of by his classmates.

One day, feeling frustrated and disheartened, Yared became fed up and ran away. Being a small boy, he didn't go far. He was tired and rested under a tree, then fell asleep. When he woke, he saw a caterpillar attempting to climb the tree.

Each time the caterpillar fell, it would get up and try again. Yared thought the caterpillar would give up, but it didn't. Eventually, the caterpillar reached the top of the tree. The caterpillar's success made Yared understand that persistence and determination were keys to overcoming challenges. Full of hope, he returned to the church. Yared apologized and begged his teacher for a second chance. His teacher asked, "What made you think to come back?"

Yared explained what he saw and the caterpillar's determination to reach where it wanted to be. His teacher, impressed, told him,

"If you want to learn, you can learn from anything, even from a small insect. Imagine what you can learn from me and the church."

Abba Gideon hugged Yared and let him back in. This moment transformed Yared's attitude toward learning. He returned to his studies with renewed motivation and determination. Over time, Yared's efforts paid off, and he became one of the most learned scholars of his time. He went on to compose hymns and religious texts that are still admired and respected today.

Yared's story teaches us that persistence and resilience can help us overcome difficulties. Like the caterpillar, we must keep trying, no matter how many times we fall.

Ethiopian musical notes to guide the church chanters in singing the words with the right melody in the church service. Gunda Gunde Monastery MS 48. https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/789560

Ethiopian musical notes, created during the Aksumite period, are still used today. By Aleme Tadesse.

Yared's Legacy

Yared grew up to be Ethiopia's most influential composer and musician. He invented an eight-note (and later ten-note) notation system of music which could form three different melodic categories. Yared is said to have written thousands of hymns.

The faithful believe that Yared's music was heaven inspired. The works attributed to him became the foundation of Ethiopian Orthodox church music. His *Zēmā* chant is one of the

most popular chants in the church and his *Mazgaba Deggwā* (Treasury of Hymns) is the oldest literary work in the Geʿez language.

Yared taught his music notation system to many students throughout his lifetime. His system was passed down for many generations. Eventually, the system developed into a musical method of teaching known as *abennat* which is still taught today. Music teachers ensure that every note is sung correctly out of respect for the spiritual origins of the music.

Yared was soon recognized as a saint in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in part due to his contributions to religious music and literature. His innovative compositions and writings remain celebrated today, showcasing the lasting legacy of the Aksumite civilization and its cultural achievements.

An Important Musical Instrument in the Church

A Collection of Ethiopian Liturgical Drums
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Collection_of_Ethiopian_Liturgical_Drums_(3424574812).jpg

Practice Writing Ge'ez Letters!

By Aleme Tadesse

People in highland Ethiopia have been using the Geʿez script for thousands of years to write stories, poems, songs, and history. Learning how they write helps us to connect with highland Ethiopian culture and understand its rich traditions. It's fun to see how the letters look like beautiful drawings!

In Dawit Muluneh's article, he explained that each letter in the Geʿez script stands for a consonant and a vowel together. Instead of having separate letters for sounds like "b" and "a," there is one symbol for "ba," another symbol for "bu," another for "bi," and so on.

Remember when you learned to write your letters? You were taught to write a "b" by making the downstroke first, and then the reverse half circle second. Scribes who write in Geʿez are also trained to write each character with particular strokes in a particular order. This ensures that each part has the right width at the right point.

Let's practice writing some characters!

Today we will write the Geʿez word for drum: "**Kabaro**."

ከበሮ (Kabaro)

1. First, break the word into connected consonants and vowels: **Ka** - **Ba** - **Ro**.
2. Say the word out loud and listen carefully.
    a. Make sure the number of sounds you say matches the number of characters you write.
    b. For Ka - Ba - Ro, that means 3 sounds, 3 characters.
3. Now, check out the video on YouTube (https://youtu.be/KKUb11XKCwM)
4. Try to write the characters by yourself on the empty lines on the next page.

Tip: Take your time and have fun! The shapes are like little pieces of art!

ከበሮ (Kabaro)

ከ _____

በ _____

ሮ _____

ከበሮ _____

ከበሮ _____

ከበሮ _____

SHARE WITH US

CREATE YOUR OWN Ge'ez Calligraphy

Watch the example video below — scan QR code.

See our student samples on the next page.

Create your own artwork.

Then have an adult guardian email a high-resolution image of your Ge'ez calligraphy to brenda.randolph@howard.edu.

Include your name, age, and the following statement:
I give Africa Access and the Center for African Studies at Howard University rights to publish my artwork.

See video sample: https://youtu.be/KKUb11XKCwM

Sanaadwe Oyugi-Armah, age 8

Akatsuki Ueno, age 7

Kenneth D. A. Cook Jr., age 10

Braelynn Brown, age 9

Jaxon Cook, age 9

Jeremiah Cook, age 6

Glossary

abjad: a script that has one character for one consonant and usually omits vowels

abugida: a script that has one character for one syllable (a consonant and a vowel), and the characters for one consonant look similar to each other

alphabet: a script that has one letter for one sound

binding: stacked quires fastened together in a codex

calligraphy: artful handwriting

character: a symbol drawn for a sound, word, or idea

codex: a handwritten book made of stacked pages bound on the left or right side (different from a scroll)

codicology: study of books and their physical characteristics

colophon: a note added at the end of a manuscript by the scribe about who copied it and why, when, and where

Coptic: the ancient African script and languages used in Egypt

drum: often used to keep rhythm and enhance the spiritual energy of the worship

fidal: the name for the script used to write Geʿez

folio: a sheet of parchment or paper, folded once to make four pages (two leaves)

Geʿez: the ancient African script and language used in highland Ethiopia

harag: a decorative element in a Geʿez manuscript (from the Geʿez word for vine tendril)

illumination: colorful decorations and paintings in a manuscript

inscription: writing carved into a hard surface, like stone

language family: a group of languages that share a common ancestor (Geʿez is in the Afroasiatic family of languages, which includes Hebrew and Arabic)

leaf: a single sheet in a manuscript with a recto and verso side (two pages)

letter: a symbol drawn for a sound only

lingua franca: a language that people who live in one place but speak different mother tongues use to communicate

liturgy: the words and songs for performing a public Christian service

logogram: a single character that represents a word or concept (like $ for “dollar” or ♡ for love)

manuscript: a text, including a book, written by hand

music notation: a script for representing music, including melody and rhythm

paper: folios made from wood or cotton

parchment: folios made from animal skin, usually sheepskin or goatskin

pastedown: the leather folded inside the front or back cover of a book, often with fabric, parchment, or paper inserted

pictogram: a single character that depicts something (like 🐂 for ox or ☽ for crescent moon)

prayer stick: a wooden staff used to maintain tempo, especially in traditional liturgical music

Psalter: a collection of texts used for prayer, including Psalms and other songs from the Bible

quire: a bundle of leaves folded together and bound inside a manuscript

recto: the front side of a leaf

rubric: a name, phrase, or section heading written in red ink

scribe: a person who writes or copies texts by hand

script: a writing system for expressing ideas and sounds

scriptorium: a place where scribes work and make texts

scroll: a handwritten strip of parchment or paper that is rolled rather than bound

sistrum: a sacred percussion instrument, typically made of metal, shaken to produce a jingling sound during ceremonies

syllabary: a script like the abugida, but the characters for the syllables for the same consonant do not look similar to each other

syllable: a vocal sound said in a single beat

text: any piece of writing, from this magazine to a book to a stone inscription

verso: the back side of a leaf

writing direction: some texts are written (and read) from right to left, like Arabic, and some from left to right, like English

writing system: any collection of characters for expressing language

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The Gold Road is an interactive map which highlights the people, places, and items related to the medieval Sudanic empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Gold, the region's most valuable resource, moved along regional and trans-Saharan routes reaching as far north as France. The Gold Road invites users to explore hundreds of topics related to the empires and their role in global history.

TheGoldRoad.org

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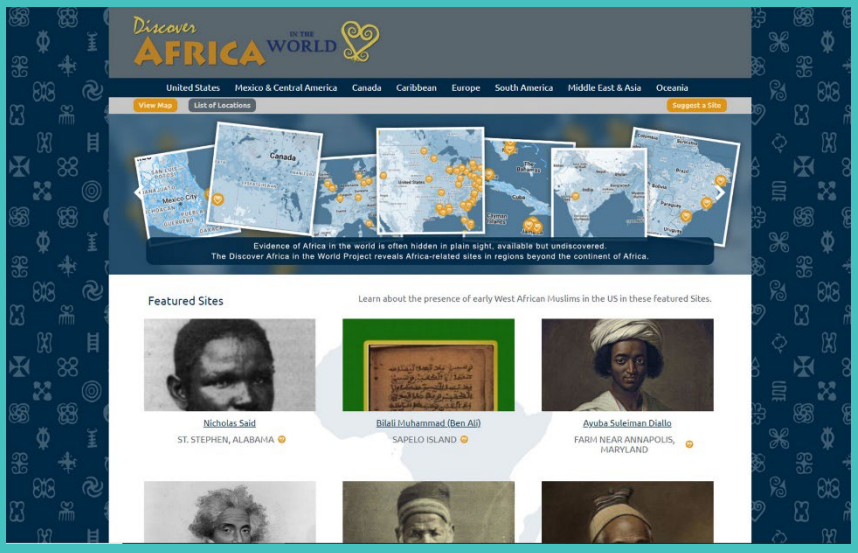

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